



**Garth Harries**  
*Superintendent*

**New Haven School Change**  
**NEW HAVEN PUBLIC SCHOOLS**

Tel: 203-946-8888  
Fax: 203-946-7300

March 17, 2014

**TESTIMONY CONCERNING:**  
**SENATE BILL NO. 473, AN ACT CONCERNING MAGNET SCHOOLS**  
**SENATE BILL NO. 476, AN ACT CONCERNING THE ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT**  
**GAP**  
**HOUSE BILL NO. 5562, AN ACT CONCERNING SPECIAL EDUCATION**  
**HOUSE BILL NO. 5567, AN ACT CONCERNING ALTERNATIVE SCHOOLS**

Good day, Senator Stillman, Representative Fleischmann, and members of the Education Committee. My name is Garth Harries and I am the Superintendent of Schools for New Haven Public Schools. Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony on behalf of the New Haven Public Schools on several bills before you today. Other bills before you are of interest to us but we are not testifying on them today. Let me say at the outset that I appreciate your committee's ongoing work on behalf of Connecticut and New Haven school children – the issues are rarely easy, but it is our collective responsibility to ensure that every Connecticut child gets a quality education.

***Senate Bill No. 473, An Act Concerning Magnet Schools.***

As a district with a significant number of magnet schools, we have a number of technical and operational suggestions that we think can help strengthen the bill. First, Section 1 of the bill requires parents to notify the school district where their child resides that the child will attend an interdistrict magnet school or is on the waiting list for an interdistrict magnet school. The notification is to be made within two weeks of the lottery.

We appreciate the intent behind the notification, to help sending schools plan their capacity for the next school year. At the same time, in terms of waiting list, it is our experience that parents may not know until the summer or even the start of the school year as to whether their child has been accepted at an interdistrict magnet school. At that point, parents sometimes turn down the offer. Therefore, the waiting list information may be less helpful – and we would hope that students do not end up without a seat in their home district should they turn down an acceptance off the wait list.

Second, we note what we think is a discrepancy in Section 2 of the bill. It reiterates that interdistrict magnet school programs who do not meet racial minorities enrollment requirements may continue in operation, so long as their plan of compliance is approved by the State Commissioner of Education, for student information data submitted on or before October 1, 2011 and 2012. It then extends the period of time when the Commissioner is to report his legislative recommendations on amending the definition to this Committee, from January 1, 2013 to January 1, 2015. It appears that interdistrict magnet school programs who are adapting to the new requirements are left in limbo for data submitted on or before October 1, 2013 and 2014, and we would respectfully request that there be an extension for those programs, just as there is for the recommendations.

As a general matter, definition changes to the magnet programs could be a powerful tool, but should be carefully evaluated. As definitions broaden to take multiracial students into account, we also urge that economic factors be a more explicit part of the diversity definition. We agree that consistency in implementation of diversity requirements for magnet schools is important, and we urge the Committee to allow enough lead time for schools in danger of non-compliance to operationalize changes to enrollment management practices. Even with legislative recommendations in 2015, there would need to be a review of the October 1, 2015 data, and thus enforcement would need to follow from there, most likely in the 2016-2017 school year.

**Senate Bill No. 476, *An Act Concerning the Academic Achievement Gap.***

We support Section 2 of the bill, extending the period of time for bilingual education from 30 months to 60 months. We have a significant and growing population of English Language Learners in the district. As several New Haven Public Schools administrators will state in their testimony to you today, research has developed extensively in this field and now shows that helping students develop key competencies in their native language while strategically transitioning them to English leads to greater academic success for those students. We of course need to be sure that students are accelerating toward English, but the cliff of bilingual services that students fall off at 30 months, regardless of their demonstrated mastery, does not well serve the developing language and academic skills of the students. We also face a significant shortage of certified bilingual teachers, and would suggest that any extensions of programs be accompanied by thoughtful flexibility about program and certification. We offer a variety of educational models for English Language Learners in New Haven, and believe that both flexibility and resources are crucial to ensure more of our ELL students achieve long-term success in school.

**House Bill No. 5562, *An Act Concerning Special Education***

We understand that there is a belief that boards of education should be required to inform parents and guardians of their right to withhold enrolling their child in kindergarten. However, many different attendance and achievement studies show that a student's participation in kindergarten, on a consistent, persistent basis, is an indicator of academic success later in school. Thus, we would suggest that an emphasis on the importance of regular and early school attendance be a part of any such requirement.

**House Bill No. 5567, *An Act Concerning Alternative Schools***

When I began my term as Superintendent last July, I made disengaged students a priority of mine. This effort will encompass many different efforts, in deep collaboration with the community: developing additional ways to engage the students during the school day and after school; strengthening academic programs in middle and high schools so students are less likely to fall behind; creating credit recovery options, to let students recuperate lost credits; working on ways to reduce school suspensions and expulsions and keeping students out of the juvenile justice system; developing alternatives to the homebound instruction we offer expelled students; and improving our transitional and alternative schools.

The bill calls for the State Department of Education to develop guidelines for alternative schools by July 1, 2015, and for more transparency by school districts in what they offer for alternatives. It

also is clear that expelled students would attend alternative schools under most circumstances envisioned in the bill.

I support all efforts to re-engage our students, including the intent of this bill. As they say, though, the devil will be in the details – and in the resources. I would suggest that there be a working group established on those guidelines, to include school districts that must expand alternative school offerings.

Although it is true that our alternative programs could use significant additional discretionary resources, they are already among our most expensive programs, given the small class size. The cost for such school districts could increase in formalizing offerings (though some other costs, such as police activity and incarceration, could drop if the alternative schools are successful) and that needs to be taken into account.

I also think there will be difficult questions wrapped up in the accountability for alternative programs, including which program students count within (the sending school or the alternative program), the measures used to ensure quality in alternative programs based on the incoming abilities of students, and ways that alternative schools can access school improvement funds from the sending schools, without their being unnecessarily vulnerable to closure and reconstitution under accountability regimes intended for more typical environments.

Educationally, alternative schools may be a place to push the envelope on our conception of school, to the extent that students have already demonstrated lack of success in our more typical school environments, including with seat-time and certification requirements.

Finally, the formalization of educational options for students who have been expelled is a welcome step, but the logistics and design of such offerings, particularly in intersection with community gangs, will be significantly complex.

Thank you.